

In The Public Interest

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IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST -- Commentary #1099

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If Central Intelligence Agency director William Casey pursues his threat to prosecute in order to plug leaks of government secrets, he'd better be prepared to indict some high members of the Reagan administration, not excluding the President himself.

Casey was miffed at Newsweek's report that U.S. intelligence had intercepted messages directly linking the Libyan mission in East Germany with the bombing of a West Berlin nightclub, before Mr. Reagan announced it to the world on live television. Some government officials are still holding their heads because he officially confirmed it as a fact.

The truth is that rival government agencies are a main source of leaks, for the purpose of floating a trial balloon or to squelch opposition within the administration, or for other reasons.

All administrations -- Republican and Democratic alike -- are bitten by the virus of secrecy on the specious if not insulting pretext that the government knows better than the public what the public should know. This defies the very principle of an open society, always done, of course, under the sacred label of protecting "national security."

Admittedly, there are items which need to be stamped "secret" but does that excuse the appalling fact that millions more items are stamped "classified" every year? When has the government declassified anything important that would enlighten the public?

Continued

SALLIE M. BLAKE, *Producer/Director* • EDWARD P. MORGAN, *Chief Correspondent*

In all the 36½ years this correspondent has covered Washington, I have never witnessed anything to compare with the phobia driving the Reagan regime to operate a "closed shop."

Abused though it may be at times, the Freedom of Information Act is one of the most valuable laws ever passed to bolster the public's "right to know." Yet the Reagan administration succeeded in weakening it.

Too often, government uses secrecy to hide mistakes which may themselves, indeed, undermine security.

Some officials would subject all government employees to a lie-detector test -- whose reliability is questionable. Diluted, that urge remains, eroding trust.

It's the often unpleasant but always vital responsibility of the news media to ferret out scandal, costly mistakes and outright crimes committed at every level of government.

Ours is a dangerous world -- nobody gets out of it alive as far as I know. We must take every sensible precaution against danger -- including terrorism. But officials like the CIA's Casey and Attorney General Meese aren't strengthening democracy by trying to close the doors of an open society to assure security.